

## Malta's Vinous Self

**Georges Meekers**

Food habits have always been part of one's everyday passive identity. How about wine? Could it be that the choice of wine, the label you select, is an active claim for a desired identity?

Surely, for the Maltese family, food has always been a source of pride. But having been for centuries the subject of foreign rulers, singularity is not as obvious for the young Maltese society – at least not as seen through a bell of wine.

Nowadays, wine may have become a means with which many people represent and contest status. But, judging by the average consumer's intransigent preferential reflex for imported wines, it appears as if Maltese wine hasn't yet been commonly embraced as an embodiment of the national Maltese spirit.

This might change, though, now that a Maltese appellation classification has been put in place.

This purpose of this system is to assure the wine's geographical provenance, its varietal make-up and certain details of production such as yield of grapes per hectare, percentage of wine per given weight of grapes, minimum sugar (grape) and alcohol (wine) levels, minimum acidity and possibly length of aging.

But the importance of the Maltese appellation system goes beyond the realm of documentation.

Provided it is policed well, it guarantees information and trust to consumers and increases the reputation of Maltese wine well beyond the Maltese shores. After all, the presence of D.O.K. (Denominazzjoni ta' Origini Kontrollata) and I.G.T. (Indikazzjoni Geografika Tipika) terminology on a bottle's label reflects the completion of a multi-level approval process from the vineyard to the state and E.U. level.

The two Q.W.P.S.R. (Quality Wine Produced in a Specific Region) tiers, namely D.O.K. and I.G.T., have come about as a result of the higher competitiveness in the liberalised Maltese wine market. In the last years especially, Malta's quality driven winemakers have increased all strategies to differentiate their respective wine portfolios and asked for a protection system to guarantee high investment and commitment. For that it was important to fit the rules of a self-regulating Maltese wine industry to new international scenarios.

In a way, the recent conception of the nation's classification system for quality wines produced in Malta underscores their significant difference, one that can arouse customer excitement.

In the local wine industry of days gone by, a positive significant difference was lacking. Now, with the inception of the Maltese appellation system, it has been created, endorsed and, more over, it will be a premise for forging the connection between wine and national identity.

The presence of 'D.O.K. Malta', 'D.O.K. Gozo' or 'I.G.T. Maltese Islands' on the label of a particular wine is more than a wine's birth certificate telling the consumer from which part of Malta the grapes used come from. Over time, it will result in a product that is strongly embedded in the natural, social, cultural and political dimensions of its place of origin. The equity of Maltese wine will be entrenched in its 'Malteseness' with all its character intact.

There is an immediate economical value to this. Attracting commerce on the cachet of speciality products such as quality wine of Maltese provenance is obviously appealing and beneficial to local businesses such as hotels, restaurants and bars that cater for the many foreign visitors in search for anything typical Maltese. Wine festivals, banquets and other celebrations where Maltese wine takes centre stage are a platform for Maltese winemakers towards the foreign and Maltese visitors and attract repeat business.

On the other hand, the classification can also be regarded as a patrimonial catalyst. Admittedly, it will be a while before a 'Brotherhood of Maltese Wine', dressed in long robes, pleated jabot and cape like *La Jurade*, parades down Republic Street. But seriously, over time, the appellation system will imply a collective patrimony not only with an economic value but also a strong cultural dimension. As in other wine producing countries, it will help address the random circumstances of local economic development because of the worldwide wine crisis. However, more importantly so, the symbolic and economic, being intimately linked, each reflects the hope of a present and future wine development in the Maltese islands.

Maltese winemakers are making quality wines on par with their respected counterparts overseas. Never before have 'difference' and 'Malteseness' been so much in the limelight as now that two Q.W.P.S.R. tiers, D.O.K. and I.G.T., have taken off.

The Maltese people in general and winemakers in particular are rediscovering their singularity and identity. More and more people are talking about the dawn of a 'new Malta', a newfound cultural and national awareness of the riches this country has to offer. When they do so over a glass of quality wine with its roots firmly in Maltese soil, they savour a droplet of their vinous self.